

LEE DUDKA

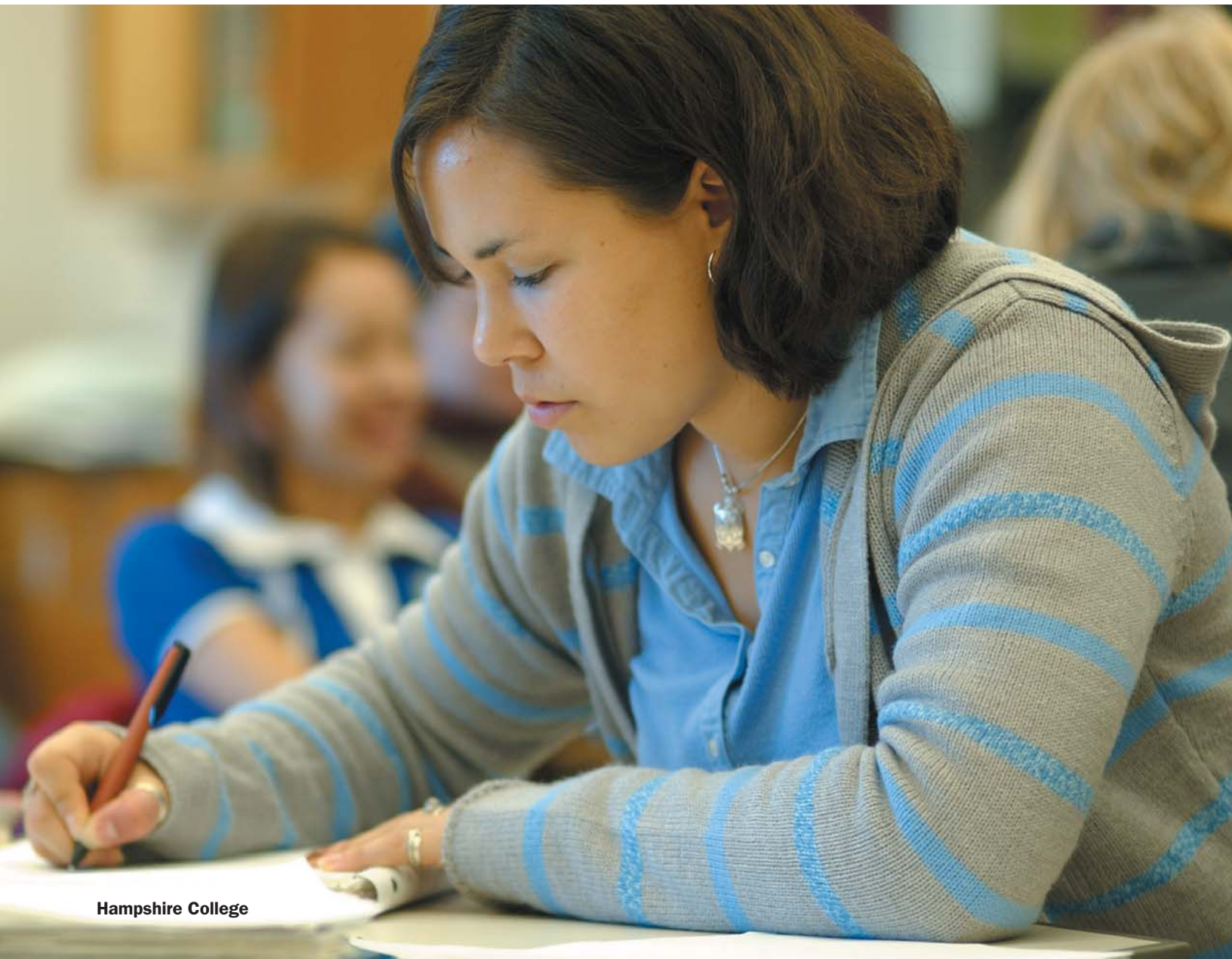


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First, let's rekindle the value of liberal education for these job-focused students and their often risk-averse employers. A generation ago, schools could offer degree programs and ignore the employability of graduates. Today, every college must address students' work-readiness, even for professional work. Weisbuch urges students to hone "work-ready"



Specialist-Rich Workplace



Hampshire College



Summer/Fall 2005

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In my two decades of consulting, I've witnessed the growing ascendancy of risk-averse managers. In hiring tech analysts for one department or marketers for another, these managers prefer specialists. Some executives may say otherwise, but an actual awareness of liberal education's value is often missing in today's hiring environment.

How to manage this is the question. Faced with this “clear and present danger,” we need strategies that generate lasting results. This surely means curricular change and new relationships with stakeholders who can promote these changes far and wide.

1. Nurture “work-ready” students who can apply the lessons learned from employer dialogues, and refocus liberal education programs on core strengths. It’s one thing to hold faculty-employer dialogues, another to manage these “moments of truth,” as former Scandinavian Airlines CEO Jan Carlson calls them. Faculty and academic leaders must work to persuade employers of the value of liberal education and how it is



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Indiana University

evolving to meet the actual demands of twenty-first-century workplaces. It is hard work.

One principle helps: dialogues change minds by appealing to common interests. Leverage this by showing how all students—those in traditional liberal arts and sciences or in professional fields—are immersed in learning work-specific “competencies” demanded by workplaces, and build measures for these competencies in courses. (“Competency” at work means effectiveness with high-percentage consistency. For example, bike riding is a skill, but know-how for biking fifty miles daily is a competency.)

Any “industrial strength” liberal education toolkit offers the analysis, persuasive writing, argumentation, and presentation skills useful in diverse groups, but these must be “work-ready.” They are taught, but students must make them competencies, not simply skills. They are crucial to workplaces hiring “knowledge workers.” In my consulting to Fortune 500 groups, for example, we “refresh” how people operate in major work units by reengineering a process. Here, key liberal education *competencies* are vital: first, multifaceted analysis of a current procedure; then reframing of that

process; finally, persuasion that convinces unsympathetic audiences to adopt new procedures for daily tasks—in short, analysis, synthesis, complex persuasion. Easy to say, difficult to do.

Experience in today’s work groups also shows the need to change employers’ older “mental models.” The key here is being clear about the goals of liberal education. Meanwhile, employer dialogues will yield the guides teachers can use to show students how to hone “work-ready” competencies. To some, these are “soft” skills, but in most workplaces, these are crucial competencies for “knowledge workers”:

- results-focused approaches for analyzing complex issues
- audience-specific skills in writing about complex topics
- techniques for marshaling persuasive mathematical evidence
- advanced skills in developing presentations for unsympathetic audiences
- guides for negotiation and conflict resolution in teams

Every working executive I know would pay dearly for graduates who are “work ready” in this sense.

To produce such graduates, we need intensive teaching sharply focused on outcomes—and creative approaches. The payoff is large, so this must be done. On one New Jersey campus, for instance, science faculty in four disciplines team-teach a series of courses—avoiding silo-like departmental focus on separate topics and focusing on similar scientific analysis. At a North Carolina campus, faculty members in one department gather weekly (and in advance) to critique individual lectures by professors and to generate more effective lectures. As a teacher and trainer of trainers, I know

this is difficult; but the examples show it is indeed doable.

2. *As curricula are refocused, tap all constituencies to promote the changes to employers.* Faculty and administrators are key agents, but when tapped, alumni can be exceptionally helpful, especially in changing employers' "mental models." To reach alumni, adapt the best

practices of alumni groups—groups that typically are tens of thousands strong. As graduates of traditional liberal education programs, alumni can effectively make "the business case" for liberal education at their worksites.

One idea with growing appeal to schools is to establish, in effect, an alumni "customer loyalty program." As in businesses, so in schools: alumni "customers" are tough to replace once lost. Businesses work to keep customers, and schools must do likewise to regularly refresh their connection with alumni. This is doable with initiatives that support alumni needs, as alumni continue supporting campuses in traditional funding drives.

Such programs simply recognize an emerging view of alumni: as Steve Calvert, alumni relations director at the University of Denver, puts it, it's not just staff or faculty but alumni that increasingly are seen as the "permanent constituency" (Sanoff 2005, D1). And though "without portfolio" now, alumni can be

chartered to promote new campus initiatives and curricular change.

For their part, alumni overwhelmingly want career guidance and help. The need reflects one statistic: working lifetimes are now sixty years (a threefold rise in a century), as Peter Drucker notes (2000, 1). So a typical graduate's lifelong "career portfolio" may show four or five careers, each with separate demands. And as alumni regularly reinvent careers—responding to the same market forces that outsource their jobs *and* affect higher education funding—schools can offer "alumni loyalty" support as alumni help campuses in turn.

One best-practice alumni career networking model is "Net Nights," developed by Princeton alumni. Its adaptable framework makes it replicable in most colleges' city-based alumni groups. The Net Nights model is focused on building relationships and long-term business connections, and designed for continual "knowledge exchanges." (One city in the Net Nights alumni network has attracted nearly 3,000 visitors in four years.) The benefits of alumni career networking groups are visible to all participants. They measurably encourage higher alumni volunteering and higher levels of annual giving, and they create more opportunity for alumni participants to hone "work-ready" competencies (guided by mentors and small groups).

Other models will work in other circumstances. But overall, we know that successful institutions will anticipate their need for change and manage their resistance to it. For these institutions, alumni loyalty is a two-way street, and they offer "alumni loyalty programs" to attract alumni support for their future growth.

Adjusting our bearings without losing our way

Let us take stock. If liberal education is to remain the nation's premier educational approach, we need a twist of the thinking cap—among administration, faculty, alumni, and "risk-averse" employers all at once. Our



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goal: persuading employers to solve workforce needs by turning to liberal education (not “specialist program”) graduates. Reversing this imbalance demands faculty ingenuity.

Rebalancing, at first, means managing change. Essential here is a notion familiar to corporations: tempering fear of the “change monster,” a psychological process with predictable phases (Duck 2001). Experience with campuses, foundations, and corporations has shown me that many initially fear change; radical change, after all, might force an institution to lose its way. But everyone can learn to tame this “monster.”

Creatively adjusting college curricula is just as critical as launching dialogues with employers. Options include across-the-curriculum efforts to retarget competencies actually prized by workplaces and to establish measurable “learning outcomes” that pinpoint the value of liberal education for students themselves. All stakeholders can help here, including the largely untapped constituency of alumni.

We know educational leaders in engineering and business do make *their* “business case” to employers. They show how their graduates offer “value” that worksites need. In turn, their success explains why their corporate funding rises as funding for more traditional liberal arts and sciences disciplines “flatlines” or falls.

Campuses focusing on liberal education, or offering professional preparation, will succeed equally by nurturing competencies with competitive advantage for the workplace. This as-yet untapped advantage is vital to organizations restructuring everywhere, and an advantage we can create through liberal education curricula.

We know schools can bolster the competencies of deft analysis, audience-sensitive writing, persuasive presenting, and negotiating. Can we use them as strategic assets and show employers that these are premier “work-readiness” toolkits? Time will tell. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.



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First Report on Learning Outcomes Released

On November 4, at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, AAC&U released *Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College*. The report draws together research from diverse sources to examine what we know—and how much we need to find out—about student achievement of important learning outcomes. To download a copy of the report, or to purchase printed copies, visit www.aacu.org/publications.

Dialogues on Liberal Education in Indiana and Nebraska

On September 21 and 22, LEAP partner campus Indiana State University held a campus-community dialogue, “The Good Life and the Good Community: The Value of Liberal Education in the Wabash Valley.” Planned in partnership with business and community leaders, the dialogue addressed the opportunities liberal education brings, how the commitment to liberal education already benefits the Wabash Valley, and how that commitment can be renewed to ensure that future generations have access to and value liberal education. In October, another LEAP partner campus—the University of Nebraska–Lincoln—launched a major curriculum review with a campus-wide dialogue about “General Education, Liberal Education: Promise and Practice.”

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